MIXERGY PRESENTS

Get Personal

How I Have Deep Conversations with Startup Founders

By **Andrew Warner**

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Why I wrote this guide

My goal with this guide is to arm you with a few conversational techniques that I learned from interviewing over 2,000 entrepreneurs on my podcast, Mixergy. I want you to have meaningful conversations with coworkers, customers, interviewees, or anyone, the type of conversation I had with Seth Godin.

My interview with him was a bit ordinary at first. I asked him about his book, Tribes. He explained his premise: everyone should lead a community. The interaction was nice. It was safe. But it wasn't meaningful.

So I reached over to the enormous bookshelf behind me and grabbed three books about entrepreneurs I admired, Ted Turner, Sam Walton, and Malcolm Forbes. “I don’t see that these guys created tribes,” I said. I was challenging him, but I think it’s important to break through the empty niceties in conversations and get to what we really care about. And I really wasn’t sure I wanted to waste time building a tribe.

Despite my pushback, if you look at the video, you’ll see he was smiling. If done right, people actually enjoy being intellectually challenged. This guide is about giving you a few techniques for doing that right.

Then he explained a huge shift in business. He said getting rich used to be like the TV show Bewitched, where Darrin Stephens and Larry Tate bought enough TV time to interrupt people with commercials so they could sell a lot of stuff and make money. They used that money to buy more TV time to interrupt more people, so they could sell more stuff. And around and around it went.

He said the world was changing. People don’t buy because they’re interrupted. They buy

from people who support them. At the time building a community felt too much like running a commune to be a serious business move, but by bringing up my doubts with Seth I understood it better and could create one of my own.

So why did Seth enjoy being challenged? Because he could look in my eyes and see that I was genuinely curious. People have a deep need to be understood. They'll forgive a lot in conversations if they can see that you're genuinely curious about them.

But this isn't just about other people. It's about you. Once you realize that conversations aren't just about driving an agenda or passing time with people -- that you have permission to be curious -- the world will become your encyclopedia and every one your personal tutor.

Some of the techniques I'll show you in this guide will seem manipulative. If that's how you use them, to manipulate people, they'll sense it and close off. But if you keep returning to your genuine curiosity, every conversation will make you a better person.

What's A Win For You?

Timothy Sykes was at it again.

How do you keep a conversation on track when the other person is determined to take it somewhere else?

I asked him about his work ethic and he managed to turn it into a pitch. "I have a DVD called Penny Stocking where I teach people… And not surprisingly, my real-time stock trade alert service is 50 times more popular than this DVD that would actually teach them to do it on their own."

I asked him about how he started blogging. “Wall Street Warriors,” he said. "It’s a hit TV show now in 14 countries, so I was in that show, in 5 to 6 episodes of season one." Then he artfully mentioned his book "people were emailing me and what they wanted to know. So I wrote a book called An American Hedge Fund."

Honestly, I was in awe of how skilled he was at pushing his products, but I couldn't spend 60 minutes like that. I interviewed Tim because he quickly turned a blog into a $45,000 per month revenue machine. He used that money to fund a collection of finance software and marketplace sites. I wanted to learn how he got people to his site and how he monetized it. I was running a content site myself and I wanted a few actionable growth techniques.

So did my audience. That's why they listened.

After Tim's interview, I leaned back in my chair and tried to figure out how to stop situations like this. They happened often, and most interviewees weren’t as deft at doing it as Tim. Most were like jackhammers, hoping that determined repetition would help them break through. Heavy-handed promotion

could ruin a podcast, just like a steamrolling salesperson or client could.

I wasn't mad. As an entrepreneur myself, I understood why some founders were so unrelentingly promotional in my interviews. When someone runs a company, they have big responsibilities. If they don't sell, they don't eat. And if they have a team, their employee's families don't eat either.

That's when I realized something. They were pushing their goals out of desperation. To tell them not to pitch would be like saying "don't eat." What if I could assure them they'd get what they needed? If they knew their goals would be met, couldn't they chill out and enjoy being interviewed? I was sure it would work, but didn't know how.

That's when I tried something new. Before an interview started, I asked my guest, "what's a win for you?" That did it. Asking people about their goals reassured them that I cared about their needs and that I'd work with them to reach those goals.

On Instagram, I posted a typical example of the reaction I get when I start a conversation

with “What’s a win for you.” In the video, you can see the start of my Zoom conversation with Adam Jackson, who founded multiple companies, including MarketSquare, the marketplace of local stores which he sold to Intuit.

Before the interview started you see how distracted and serious he is. Then I ask him “what’s a win for you?” He looks like he’s taken back by the question. He smiles. Then he says, “you know I feel like it already is a win because you asked that.”

He went on to tell me that he likes to talk about how much he disagrees with the way funding is done in Silicon Valley and that he likes to get “outside the box a little bit.” Disagreeing with funding was unexpected from someone who raised over $23 million for his startup and seemed to master it.

I usually do a very structured interview. I like my interviews to proceed in chronological order, like a biography. I can see how that might seem like I’m boxing him in too much. Since he told he liked hitting back on the unfair funding process, I made sure to find an opportunity for him to do that. That reassured

him enough to go with my more structured format. He happily went back to his early days of going from store to store in San Francisco, asking store owners to list themselves in his marketplace, and kept answering my questions about how he built and sold multiple companies.

I start most of my calls with some version of "what's a win for you?"

Try it. You'll see it'll help you get your goal.

Wasted Phone Calls

I paid $500 for a coaching call with a book editor. At the end of our call, I realized my mistake. She gave me some useful guidance, but I could tell that was pretty much it. She wouldn't think of me after the call or send me helpful advice that popped in her head as she went through her day. And I couldn't email her with a quick question or expect more help, unless I paid for another $500 call.

My mistake came from a good intention. I was so eager to avoid wasting her time (which I was paying for) that I got right to the point and stayed focused on our call's goal. As a

result, I made the interaction completely transactional. We didn't establish empathy for each other. We didn't even know each other.

This type of thing happened to me often with people I hadn't met in person. Apps like Zoom and FaceTime are how I communicate with people for work, and increasingly it's how I meet people outside of work. I only talked with one of my son's teachers on Zoom, for example, never in person.

My solution came from a technique that Eric Schmidt used for over a decade as Google's CEO. Every Monday at 1pm he held his staff meeting, with the usual agenda, check-ins, and people secretly emailing. Schmidt did one thing differently though. Before starting with work he asked everyone to talk about their weekends. It seemed informal and impromptu, but it's part of a communication style he spent years perfecting. It led to empathy among team members and better decision making.

My first attempt at it failed. Before interviews and private calls, I'd ask questions like, "How's your day going?" or "what did you do this weekend?" Most people would give me

short, meaningless answers, like “good,” or “just went out with some friends.” Then there was an awkward silence before we doubled down on work talk.

I eventually realized that people don’t know if it’s appropriate to talk about their personal lives or how much to share.

So I decided to go first. Before talking to anyone, I made sure to be aware of one personal thing that was going on in my life and open the meeting with that. To eliminate the worry that we’d get off track, I made sure to mention that I was aware we had an agenda.

I started one meeting by saying, “I know we have a lot to cover in a little time, but I have to tell you I this morning I watched my youngest son strut out of the house like he won a Super Bowl because he turned four. We should all start out days that proudly. What’s your family up to?” That led to a conversation about what she missed about her kids being young.

I began another call with “I had a great run down Valencia street today. I think you and I are the last people in tech to stay in San

Fransisco. What do you think about how the city changed?" Turns out he left the city. He told me what he loved about Nashville, his new hometown, and a few tips he picked up for staying top of mind in the startup scene while living away from it.

I hate small talk. That's now what this is. What I'm trying to do is humanize the conversation. Like the photo at the top of a LinkedIn page that's otherwise all-businesses, it gives us a sense of each other.

Origin Story And Wasted Opportunities

When Mike Del Ponte did an interview with me, one of the first things I wanted to know was how he came up with the idea for Soma, the gorgeous water-filtering carafe.

I expected him to pout or roll his eyes the way other founders do when asked about how they came up with the ideas for their businesses.

I get it. They feel like they're asked the question a million times. Every time they talk about their business it seems someone wants

to know how they came up with their original idea. And there's rarely a single way they came up with it. It's often a collection of random ideas, frustrations, and market observations that lead to a company. No one wants to hear it. People want the epiphany, the one thing, the one short answer.

By being frustrated, most founders miss out on a big opportunity.

It reminds me of when I got back from backpacking in Europe and people kept asking me what my favorite city was. I was asked so often that I wanted to yell at people, "I DON'T HAVE A FAVORITE. I liked a lot of places. I'm tired of this banal question. Stop asking."

Of course, I realized I was being too sensitive. Once I stopped being a baby it occurred to me that since I get asked the question so often, I should just have an answer ready. I made a mental list of all the places I loved. All I had to do was pick one of them and tell people it. They weren't looking for the specific city that was my best. They just wanted to get to know my experience.

Then I realized the best part of my experience wasn't the cities, it was the people I met. The next time I was asked about my favorite city on my backpacking trip, I had an answer ready.

I said, "I don't have a favorite place, but I loved getting to meet new people everywhere. Running with the bulls in Pamplona was wonderful, but what made me happier was meeting two new friends and spontaneously getting on a train with them to Madrid. I loved Paris, but what I enjoyed more was meeting a few Americans who'd never been there before and giving them a private walking tour of the city. We spent hours talking about everything from our first loves to how one of them was in a cult as a child. I get excited about meeting new people."

When that became my go-to answer it turned a tired conversation topic into one that brought me back to the fun I had. Friends got to know my passion for meeting new people. One of those friends, Paul, heard my response and said, "maybe you could find a way to keep getting to know new people now that you're back home."

We talked about how I could do it. That led us to create an event he called Circle of Five. The idea was that 5 friends would each co-host a get-together. Each friend would invite 5 of their friends. That way, we'd have an evening with 30 people who mostly didn't know each other, but who were loosely connected, since they were all friends of friends.

My friend Heather co-hosted one of those parties with me and invited her friend Olivia. Olivia and I have been married for over a decade now.

As I grew more excited about the guests who came to the events I started interviewing them on my site, Mixergy.com. Interviewing fascinating startup founders on that site became my life's work.

To be asked the same question over and over is a gift. If people ask the question a lot, it means they probably care about the topic, a lot. So they're more likely to listen to the response. Take some quiet time to think about your answer ahead of time. Make it count.

When I interviewed Mike about his carafe, he made it count. I asked him how he came up

with his idea it and he gave an answer that was so good I'll copy and paste it here:

The idea for Soma came from a dinner party that I hosted in San Francisco, about a year and a half ago.

Everything in the house was perfect, and as my friends started coming in, one of them said “May I have a glass of water?”

So I was like “Sure. Of course. No problem.”

I walk into my kitchen, and I open up my fridge, and I reach in, and I grab my Brita water pitcher and I take one look at it and I’m like There’s no way I can put it on the dinner table. It’s made of cheap plastic. There these black flakes swimming in the water. I can’t remember when I changed my filter.”

So I went and I grabbed a glass wine decanter and I put it onto my counter and I start pouring the water from the Brita into the decanter. As I did, the lid flew off, water spilled all over my floor, I got so mad I wanted to throw the Brita against the wall.

At that moment one of my friends walks in and he says, “What the heck is going on in

here?" He could tell I was furious and I told him the story. We both started cracking up.

I said, "Why don't they just design something that's beautiful, sustainable and actually works?" and he said "Why don't we do it?" And that was the first general concept.

In that story, he expressed a problem that every one of his ideal customers has. I read the transcript of the interview and noticed when he was done I said, "I've done that."

Does Mike's story sound too polished? I told him it seemed too perfect.

He acknowledged that he had to fineness It a bit. He said, "If I told you the full story of that entire night and the conversations we had and then the brainstorms, you wouldn't remember anything except, 'This guy spilled some water.' By taking the most powerful moments out of that story, you're able to really remember the parts that hit the most, and that's a big challenge for entrepreneurs as well, is just simplify, simplify, simplify."

Learn from Mike. If you get asked the same question repeatedly, have an answer ready.

Role Model Persuasion Technique

I start my day checking the tech startup news. One Friday morning I woke up and read a mysterious article about a possible bribe taken by one of TechCrunch's bloggers, Daniel Brusilovsky.

I instantly wanted to interview this writer to understand what happened. I found Daniel's email and sent him a message. He told me he was a big fan of my podcast, but didn't want to do the interview. The news just broke. It was too soon, he explained.

I could understand the embarrassment of being called out by the tech press, including VentureBeat, Gawker, Silicon Valley Watcher, and Huffington Post.

People aspire to be like their heroes, so I emailed him this:

The entrepreneurs you admire have done some crazy stuff in the past.

Here's a line from Richard Brandon's Wikipedia: "In 1971, Branson was arrested and charged for selling records in Virgin stores that had been declared export stock."

If an entrepreneurial hero got arrested when he was on his way up, mistakes can be overcome.

A few minutes later he agreed to a phone call and ended up doing the interview with me while the story was hot.

Gary Dell'Abate, who produces The Howard Stern Show, said some musicians who appear on the show don't want to sign a release, allowing the show to use their music. They're worried about negative implications. His response? He pulls out a copy of the release

that was signed by Paul McCartney. Once they see that the legendary Beatle signed it, resistant musicians sign too.

If you want to persuade someone to do what you're asking, look for examples of their heroes doing it. When I interview, one of my challenges is persuading entrepreneurs to reveal some of the shadier things they did to build their companies. When I read this quote From investor Paul Graham at a TechCrunch Disrupt event, I knew it would help me.

Startups often have to do slightly devious things. You can tell if people have a gleam in their eye. You don't want people who would be obedient employees... we're not looking for people who did what they were told in life.

Graham is incredibly respected by tech entrepreneurs. In the early days of the consumer internet, he created ViaWeb, an online store builder, which he sold to Yahoo. Then he created Y Combinator, the investment firm that helped launch Reddit, Airbnb, Dropbox, and many hugely Silicon Valley startups.

When I look at my preinterview notes and see a story that looks like it was crafted by a public relations firm, I read my guest that quote. Then I ask the founder what "slightly devious things" she did to grow her company. After hearing that quote, a founder who doesn't have a sly story or two might feel inadequate.

When you find yourself trying to persuade a person to do something, look for examples of their hero doing it.

Personal Touch Research

At first, I didn't take Nardwuar seriously. A friend sent me a compilation video of his interviews called "Rappers Mind Blown By Nardwuar Part 1." In clips after clip, you see him wearing his funny Scottish golf cap, complete with a Pom Pom on top, standing next to a rapper who doesn't know what to make of him.

Quickly though, he wins each interviewee over by mentioning little known details of their past. My favorite is Pharrell Williams. When Nardwuar asks him about The Rump Shaker and shows the album, Pharrell is

literally speechless. When he recovers he says "This is…this is…this is one of the most impressive interviews I ever experienced in my life. This is…this is insane."

I've never made anyone speechless. Actually finding little gems from their past helps people open up to me because they see that I took the effort to know them.

A good example of that is what happened when I talked with Gregory Galant, who founded The Shorty Awards, a coveted award for social media stars. My pre-interview conversation with Greg was productive, but he was leaning back from his webcam during the conversation, as if he were trying to protect himself from me.

Being interviewed comes with landmines. Interviewees might reveal too much. Or they might get called out for taking credit for something that their team did. Or they might be facing an interviewer with a hidden agenda to bring them down. Whatever their worry, guests tend to be a bit cagey.

I happened to hear that Greg bought a road bike. I asked him about it. When I brought it

up, he smiled. He told me about the multi-day bike rides he went on. He shared that he bikecamped, carrying camping gear on his bike so he could sleep outdoors between strenuous days of cycling. He told me that one of his few splurges after growing his company was buying an expensive bike. He had a big smile on his face as he told me all this. And so did I.

Today it's easy to find the personal topics that light people up. Before meeting someone, I often scroll through their Twitter feed. I look at the non-work section of their LinkedIn, to see if there's something unique about the schools they attended. I Google them and flip past the first 2 pages to see what stands out.

One of the least appreciated research tools is the advanced section of search tools. I love to Google a guest and limit the results I get to 10 years ago, to see what they were like before they were successful. If they're active on social platforms like Twitter or Hacker News, I go through their older posts.

Often, I'll uncover a relic of their younger selves that feels too personal for me. When researching the founder of a multi-billion

dollar startup, I found an old video of him talking about a TV show, while wearing his pajamas. I ignored it and moved on. I want to avoid spying on people or making them feel I've entered too deeply into their private space.

My goal is to put them at ease. The legendary interviewer Barbara Walters said her easy in with businesspeople was asking about their first jobs. She said businesspeople "dote on recollections of their first earnings with the same poignancy and pleasure of other men recalling their first loves."

I did that in a recent interview with Brett Kopf, founder of Remind, the communication tool used by over 30 million teachers, students, and parents. He told me he founded the company from the little consulting money he earned. I asked, "from Social Bonfire?" His eyes widened. "How did you know!" he called out, and complimented me on my research ability. I didn't tell him, but it was on his LinkedIn profile. But like most people who aren't looking for work, he hadn't spent much time on his LinkedIn account.

It doesn't take much research to show you care, but it's worth it.

Interrupt Without Being Rude

I thought he was going to be upset. After spending months convincing this entrepreneur to do an interview with me for Mixergy, I kept interrupting him. But I had to. He was going on and on. How could my listeners put up with that? How could I? If I'm going to host an interview I need to be considerate of my guest, but I also need the conversation to be interesting for me.

So I interrupted him. Quite a bit.

Then, when I ended my interview, I prepared for him to rip into me.

"Andrew," he said. "Thanks for getting me back on track. I'm not good at public speaking. I found myself droning on and I didn't know how to get back to my point. I can see why my friends like being interviewed by you. You're good."

If done right, interrupting someone will make the conversation helpful to you, but also for them. But how do you do it right? As soon as the transcription of our interview was done, I went back to read it and see what I did.

That's when I saw an approach that I've recycled for years because it continues to work. I said, "I'm sorry to interrupt," and explained WHY I was interrupting. I gave a higher purpose.

I can't embarrass this founder by calling him out by name. But I Googled instances of this technique on my site and discovered I used this magical little phrase over 170 times. Here are some examples that will help you see how it's done.

I'm sorry to interrupt, but I really want to get into the details of this.

I'm sorry to interrupt but [you said] "fanatical optimism." How do you maintain fanatical optimism

I'm sorry to interrupt but I really want to understand this concept because...

I'm sorry to interrupt, but . . . how did you conclude? Because I want to get into some of the marketing stuff that you did.

I'm sorry to interrupt but this is something that I need to learn from you

I'm sorry to interrupt, but I want to talk more in-depth about that

The first time you use the phrase "sorry to interrupt" you'll feel awkward because you're calling yourself out. You're acknowledging that you're about to do something every teacher taught you not to do. Get past it by making sure you explain your higher purpose for doing it.

If the higher purpose is important enough to the person you're talking with, they'll

appreciate it. So, "sorry to interrupt, but you're boring me," is awful, obviously. On the other hand, "sorry to interrupt, but I really want to make sure I understand what you're saying" can be flattering.

About the Author

Andrew Warner is the founder of Mixergy, where he's interviewed over 2,000 founders since 2008. Before that he founded Bradford & Reed, a collection of online greeting card sites.